

# Back-to-roots again? *Kirchnerismo* as a reclaiming of classical Peronism\*

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## Abstract

This article seeks to examine how Kirchnerism emerged and then dominated Argentine politics as the most powerful strand of Peronism since the early-2000s. Based on an analysis of the political, socio-economic and organizational-leadership attributes of classical Peronism and Menemism, the major argument of this study is that Kirchnerism, with its center-left agenda, has attempted to reclaim traditional Peronism by highlighting its focus on political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice, in contrast to Menemism, which emerged as a neoliberal interpretation of Peronism during the 1990s. However, the Kirchnerist opposition to Menemism at times remained mostly rhetorical, as revealed by the key similarities between these two in practice.

*Key words:* Argentine politics, Kirchnerism, Menemism, Peronism, Populism in Latin America.

## 1. Introduction

After four years in opposition, Peronism is back again. As a result of the last general elections, held on 27 October 2019, the Peronist candidate Alberto Fernandez, the former Chief of the Cabinet of Ministers, defeated the current president, Mauricio Macri by taking over 48 percent of the votes in the first round (BBC, 2019; CNN, 2019). Beyond the election of Fernandez as the new president, these elections also produced another important result: the ex-president Cristina

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\* Submitted/Geliş: 02.09.2017, Accepted/Kabul: 19.11.2020

\*\* My thanks go to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Canan Aslan Akman, Dr. Sümercan Bozkurt and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and contributions.

Fernandez de Kirchner (2007-2015) now returned as the vice-president. As Kirchner is widely commented to be the primary force behind this electoral triumph, these elections are widely commented to manifest the continued relevance of Kirchnerism, as well as Peronism, as a political force in Argentine politics.

As such, Peronism has once again proved its enduring strength and popularity. Since the rise of Colonel Juan Domingo Peron from the early-1940s, Peronism as a movement has set the rules of the political game in Argentina. This has reached such an extent that being a Peronist or not keeps standing as the primary point of reference when determining political allegiances. In addition, the fact that Peronist presidents, including Carlos Menem, Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, Eduardo Duhalde, Nestor Kirchner, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and now Alberto Fernandez have governed the country for over a quarter century since the transition to democracy in 1983 may also evidence the core position of Peronism in Argentine politics.

The centrality of Peronism in domestic politics has even led some commentators to identify Argentina as a “Peronist democracy”, rather than a delegative or hyper-presidential one (Casullo, 2014). Indeed, what is critical in understanding the continued dominance of Peronism is its ideologically flexible and politically eclectic nature, which has enabled it to adapt to changing circumstances (Calvo and Murillo, 2012; Szusterman, 2000; Wylde, 2010) by overcoming numerous challenges, such as military coups, electoral defeats and internal frictions. Therefore, as is the case for other cases of populism, Peronism has simultaneously encompassed many different, and at times clashing, factions for decades.

Moving from this path, the main argument of this article is that Kirchnerism, with its center-left agenda, has attempted to reclaim classical Peronism by highlighting its focus on political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice, in contrast to Menemism, emerging as a rather neoliberal interpretation of Peronism during the 1990s. In other words, whilst setting its major premises, Kirchnerism has drawn on classical Peronism and Menemism not only as its historical antecedents but also as the primary points of reference, in positive and negative senses, respectively. However, Kirchnerism’s negative references to Menemism at times remained mostly rhetorical, as revealed by key similarities between these two in practice. Hence, designating classical Peronism and Menemism as the main stages that laid the ground for Kirchnerism, this article seeks to examine the emergence and ascendance of Kirchnerism as the most powerful strand of Peronism in recent decades. In this respect, the convergences and divergences of Kirchnerism with classical Peronism and Menemism as to the political, socio-economic and organizational-leadership dimensions will primarily be taken into account.

Relying on theoretical scheme offered by Arnson and de la Torre (2013) that explains three historical waves of populism under the currents of classical populism,

neopopulism and radical populism, this article is divided into three main parts<sup>1</sup>. In the first part, classical Peronism will be analyzed as the era of classical populism in Argentina, based on its defining features that were constituted during three presidential terms of Juan Peron, alongside the brief presidency of his third wife, Maria Estela ‘Isabel’ Martinez de Peron<sup>2</sup>. Second, Menemism will be examined as the mix of ideas dominating the era of neopopulism, or neoliberal populism (Armony, 2005; Cammack, 2000; de la Torre, 2007; Roberts, 1995; 2007; Weyland, 2003), in Argentina. Finally, how Kirchnerism –as a Peronist form of radical populism in Argentina- emerged in the shape of a “back-to-basics” movement within Peronism will be issued, around its convergences and divergences with classical Peronism and Menemism.

## 2. Classical Peronism: Classical populism in Argentina

Classical Peronism, as the Argentine form of classical populism and the primary guide of Kirchnerism, emerged in the course of the 1943 Coup, which ended the “Infamous Decade”<sup>3</sup>. Despite taking part in the new administration as the Minister of Labour, the closer links that Colonel Juan Peron established with the working class and the unions caused discontent on the part of the business sector and the military government. Therefore, the government arrested Peron in a bid to eliminate him politically. However, the support of the huge masses for Peron, as happened in the Plaza de Mayo on 7 October 1945, was instrumental to him finally being elected as the president in 1946. Peron proceeded to serve as president until 1955, when he was ousted from the office by a military coup. After spending almost 20 years in exile in Spain, with his movement banned by the military authorities, Peron returned to be elected as the president again in 1973, until his death next year. Since then, Peronism has succeeded to remain as one of the permanent elements of Argentine politics.

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<sup>1</sup> In applying this theoretical framework to the case of Peronism, key historical events will be wielded, alongside the political, socio-economic and organizational attributes of the three distinct episodes of Peronism.

<sup>2</sup> Given the limited scope of the paper, only the periods during which classical Peronism was in power (1946-1955, 1973-1976) will be examined, without covering the phases spent in exile (1955-1973) or outside power (1976-1989).

<sup>3</sup> The Infamous Decade is a period which started with the coup d’état in 1930 and was mostly characterized by corruption, economic turmoil, electoral fraud and the oppression of the working class.

### 2.1. Political dimension of classical Peronism

It was against such a backdrop that Peronism evolved as a widely supported political movement. This directly impacted on the development of its political premises. Depending on the defense of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and a strong, ‘pro-labor’ state, classical Peronism sought to present itself as a national ‘Third Position’ vis-à-vis capitalism and socialism. As President Peron explained in one of his speeches made in the Congress in 1948, Peronism was generally seen in the eyes of its supporters as “humanism in action”, and “a new political doctrine, which rejects all the ills of the politics of previous times” (Hellinger, 2015). In this respect, political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice were designated as three primary pillars of the “justicialist” movement.

Emerging in response to the deep societal crisis inflicted by the Infamous Decade and the growing demands of the working class in the post-war period (Grigera, 2017: 7-8), classical Peronism thus attached large importance to the political incorporation of the hitherto excluded social masses, such as the organized labor, the poor and the dispossessed (Arnson and de la Torre, 2013; Szusterman, 2000). In particular, the iconic status and activities of Eva ‘Evita’ Peron opened the way to the active participation of women in politics.

It was this political orientation of classical Peronism around the principles of political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice, alongside the political incorporation of the excluded masses, that would constitute the essence of Kirchnerism’s political discourse decades later.

### 2.2. Socio-economic dimension of classical Peronism

Just like other variants of classical populism, classical Peronism emerged in the 1930s’ Argentina when the oligarchic elites started to lose control due to the fast-paced industrialization and urbanization processes, which led to a new urban mass sector that was disposed to political mobilization (Roberts, 1995: 113). In such a constellation, classical Peronism moved to establish a corporatist coalition on the societal level mainly between the industrialists and the workers. According to this formula, under the supervision of the pro-labor state, classical Peronism would host a popular alliance between the industrialists and the workers in a conflict-free manner. Through this way, classical Peronism aimed to act on behalf of the poor and the workers, known as “the shirtless ones” (*los descamisados*) (Baer, 2014).

In line with this corporatist logic, classical Peronism resorted to strong state intervention in the economy, in an effort to achieve economic sovereignty and egalitarian redistribution of income and wealth. This means that the state would act for national progress, as well as for the interests of the labor and the needy masses.

In order to achieve the first goal, a strategy of ‘national developmentalism’ was adopted, based on the commitment to developing a national industry and supporting domestic industrialists through different schemes (Arnson and de la Torre, 2013; Cammack, 2000). This emphasis on national developmentalism automatically shifted the center of gravity from the export-oriented growth model to the import-substitution industrialization (ISI) model.

For the second goal, classical Peronist administration introduced several social programs that benefited the working class, trade unions, and the disadvantaged. In the context of the ‘welfare state’ structure, albeit different from its European equivalents, many progressive social programs such as universal free education, compulsory social security and subsidized housing were applied.

In sum, despite noticeable differences, the attempt of classical Peronism to form a historic, multi-class coalition between business and labor and its social welfare-oriented approach later inspired the Kirchnerist movement while shaping its socio-economic priorities.

### *2.3. Organizational-leadership dimension of classical Peronism*

The organizational-leadership dimension of classical Peronism was substantially influenced by its political and socio-economic aspects. On the one hand, like other cases of classical populism, classical Peronism was thus primarily about the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by a charismatic leader, that is Peron, through defying “the elite” on behalf of a designated *pueblo*, or “the people” (Roberts, 2007: 6). By combining nationalist appeals and an anti-oligarchic discourse adhered to state-led industrialization, workers’ rights, and social welfare reforms (Roberts, 2007: 8), classical Peronism adopted a populist discourse polarizing its societal support base against internal and external ‘foes’. With some changes in the composition of the targeted groups, this anti-oligarchic rhetoric kept on being utilized not only by Carlos Saul Menem but also by Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner during their presidential terms.

On the other hand, given the wide spectrum of political and ideological sentiments that Peronism encompasses, what was principally important for the classical Peronist organization was the undisputable leadership of Juan Peron. In this regard, the charismatic and personalist leadership of Peron functioned as sort of a common denominator among all the constitutive elements of the Peronist bloc. However, this over-emphasis on Peron’s leadership resulted in the PJ (*Partido Justicialista* – Justicialist Party) turning out to be a rather weakly institutionalized party, which was principally conceived as an ‘electoral machine’ in conveying the Peronist messages to the masses (Herrera, 2007).

In addition, the unifying character of Peron's leadership eroded particularly on his third presidential term in 1973-4, as witnessed in the bloody conflicts happening between the left- and right-wing Peronists, which reached a climax in the Ezeiza Massacre in 1973<sup>4</sup>. Despite not happening at such a high level, the internal frictions, as well as the large devotion to the 'leader', continued to characterize the later phases of the Peronist movement, as seen in the denunciation of Menemism by Kirchnerism.

### 3. Menemism: Neopopulist update in Peronism

Menemism, the antecedent and major 'negative' point of reference of Kirchnerism, is widely considered to fall into the category of neopopulism, or neoliberal populism. At the onset, populism, together with statism and nationalism, were assumed to gradually eclipse with the rise of neoliberalism (Roberts, 2007: 4). However, as recognized later, neoliberalism proved to facilitate the adjustment of populism to changing circumstances rather than to stimulate its decline (Roberts, 1995: 112). In this vein, framed as an 'attempted marriage of populism and neoliberalism' (Knight, 1998), neopopulism is primarily exemplified by the policy practices of Menemism in Argentina, as well as Fujimorism in Peru (Cammack, 2000: 159).

Though acknowledged to appear with the start of Menem's presidency in 1989, the historical background of Menemism is possible to be traced back to the early-1970s, the third presidential term of Peron. This is precisely because classical Peronism *per se* showed signs of remarkable change when Peron was back from exile to be re-elected as president in 1973. Though the primary attributes of classical Peronism were mostly preserved, President Peron, for instance, was placing more emphasis on anti-communism, at a time when the left and right-wing Peronists were clashing, alongside being more open to economic liberalism. This attitudinal change even intensified during the presidency of Isabel Peron in 1974-1976, which was characterized by widespread social unrest, state suppression on the political left, high levels of inflation and an orthodox economic policy (Horowitz, 1999: 38).

When the 1990s came, the international setting had radically changed, with the bipolar Cold War order ending and the neoliberal globalization process being fully underway. In such circumstances, Menemism rose as a new form of Peronism that co-existed with, and even implemented, neoliberal structural adjustment

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4 The Ezeiza Massacre took place on 20 June 1973 near the Ezeiza International Airport in Buenos Aires, where the anti-communist, right-wing Peronist groups targeted the left-wing Peronist groups, such as *Montoneros*, which were to welcome the return of Juan Peron from 18-year-long exile in Spain. According to the official figures, the attacks caused 13 deaths, with over 300 people wounded, but the number is generally acknowledged to be much higher.

reforms (Roberts, 2007: 4). Though evoking the images of classical Peronist leadership, Menemist policies sharply diverged from the statist and economically redistributive emphases of classical Peronism (Roberts, 1995: 82). Therefore, as exemplified by Menemism itself, there exists a scholarly consensus on that neoliberalism and populism have some unexpected affinities in the context of neopopulism (de la Torre, 2007; Knight, 1998; Richardson, 2009; Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1996; 1998; 1999; 2001; 2003). To put it another way, Menemism, like other variants of neopopulism, marks more than a historical accident or a ‘marriage of convenience’ between neoliberalism and populism, but was enforced by a “seemingly odd, but mutual attraction” (Weyland, 1996: 6). As it stands, it is likely to observe how neoliberalism and populism joined forces under the framework of neopopulism, in the particular context of the political, socio-economic and organizational-leadership dimensions of Menemism.

### *3.1. Political dimension of Menemism*

Menemism gained power at a time when both the country and the Peronist movement were in disarray. In the first democratic elections after the end of the military dictatorship in 1983, the PJ lost to the UCR (*Union Civica Radical* - Radical Civic Union) candidate, Raul Alfonsin. However, in the face of the escalating political and socio-economic crisis throughout the 1980s, President Alfonsin had to call an early general election in 1989. Throughout the election campaign, Menem pledged to the classical Peronist economic and social policies. However, once elected to the office, Menem made a dramatic U-turn and launched a neoliberal policy program, as inspired by Thatcher in the UK and Reagan in the US (Horowitz, 1999; Weyland, 2003; Wylde, 2010). In contrast to classical Peronism, which promoted itself as a solution to the failed liberal institutions, Menemism thus favored neoliberalism as the major antidote to the ongoing crisis (Cammack, 2000: 159).

The purported affinities between neopopulism (Menemism) and neoliberalism came into the fore regarding their politically symbiotic relationship. Sharing an opportunistic and manipulative nature, both Menemism and neoliberalism aimed to move pragmatically so as to adapt to new challenges (Armony, 2005: 5). This means that whilst Menemism drew on populist devices to gain consent for neoliberal market reforms, the neoliberal attacks on the established political and economic interests strengthened Menemism’s hand in power (Weyland, 1996; 2003). In other words, the personalist and plebiscitarian strategy of Menemism based on political deinstitutionalization functioned as a “superstructure” that cleared the way for the imposition of controversial neoliberal reforms (Armony, 2005; Roberts, 1995). In turn, neoliberalism provided many advantages to Menem governments, not least as to implementing the neopopulist

policy agenda (Armony, 2005; Weyland, 2003). After all, whilst President Menem relied on the Minister of Economy, Domingo Cavallo to guarantee economic stability for re-election, Cavallo needed President Menem's command over political support for implementing market-oriented reforms (Weyland, 1996: 6). Later, this politically beneficial relationship between Menemism and neoliberalism would be harshly criticized by the Kirchnerist leadership.

### 3.2. *Socio-economic dimension of Menemism*

With regard to Menemism's socio-economic premises, the story was more or less similar to its political dimension. As said before, despite running on a classical Peronist platform and promising huge wage increase (*salariozoa*) and a "productive revolution" in the run-up to the 1989 elections, Menem dramatically adopted a neoliberal agenda when elected to the office (Horowitz, 1999; Scherlis, 2008; Szusterman, 2000). Resorting to neoliberal economic prescriptions, such as export-oriented growth strategy and cuts in welfare spending, the Menemist economic policies principally set out to provide an effective answer to the demise of the developmentalist state (Cammack, 2000; Roberts, 1995; Ronchi, 2011). Therefore, with reference to his abandoning the classical Peronist policies of protectionism and state interventionism in favor of neoliberal economic policies, Menem was recalled as a "Peronist president without Peronism" throughout his term in 1989-1999.

Beyond representing a more neoliberal variant of Peronism, Menemism also rested upon new social bases. On the one side, Menemism, like neoliberalism, sought to primarily appeal to the politically demobilized and unorganized labor in the informal sector (Armony, 2005; Roberts, 1995; 2007; Weyland, 1996). Moreover, the rural and urban poor were covered amongst the constituencies of Menemism (Szusterman, 2000, Weyland, 1996; 2003), alongside some elements of the middle class (Wylde, 2010: 5). This automatically translated into strained relations with the organized labor and trade unions, such as CGT (Confederacion General del Trabajo - General Confederation of Labor), even at the expense of damaging the classical Peronist alliance of industrialists-workers (Wylde, 2010: 14).

On the other side, the Menemist administration developed closer links with the business sector in the economic policy-making (Wylde, 2010: 18). This seemingly contradictory multi-class coalition not only extended the personalist policy style of Menemism, it as well undermined the formal policy-making procedures (Sushant, 2012; Weyland, 2000). In a similar vein, the selective incorporation of some classes worked to prevent the emergence of a united labor opposition against the neoliberal measures of Menemism (Roberts, 1995: 111).

Depending on this multi-class coalition on a societal level, Menemist economic policies were primarily rooted in the Washington Consensus (Iglesias,

2015; Ronchi, 2011; Szusterman, 2000; Wylde, 2010). Developing closer relations with the international capitalist organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Argentina under the Menemist administration turned into a ‘poster boy’ of the neoliberal policies (Grigera, 2017: 7).

According to Menem, the market stood as a key aspect of the social life, with globalization representing “an opportunity for economic development”, both of which would ultimately serve the interests of “Great Argentina” (Armony, 2005: 12). During Menem’s time in office, the Argentine economy was drastically opened to global competition (Horowitz, 1999: 41). In this regard, the neoliberal economic project of Menemism mainly rested on market liberalization, trade liberalization, and most importantly, privatization of key state assets (Arnson and de la Torre, 2013). Put simply, Menem was principally concerned with ensuring macroeconomic stability by controlling inflation through the Convertibility regime and increasing efficiency through economic liberalization and privatization (Wylde, 2010: 14). The structural measures applied by the government involved lowering barriers to foreign trade and investment, tightening fiscal policy, limiting the provision of social services and discouraging labor strikes (Weyland, 2000). With the implementation of a radical privatization program, a broad range of state-owned enterprises, such as oil, communications, railroad, energy and airlines, were privatized (Horowitz, 1999; Ronchi, 2011).

In the short run, those neoliberal reforms achieved some success in providing economic recovery, by boosting the economic growth and investment, along with drops in poverty and unemployment levels (Szusterman, 2000: 201). Nevertheless, other than remaining mostly temporary, those measures fell short of permanently solving the problems of social inequality and income injustice. Consequently, during the domestic turbulence of 2001-2002, the neoliberal economic policies applied during Menem’s presidency were held responsible, *inter alia*, for the financial collapse of Argentina, not least by the Kirchnerist movement.

### *3.3. Organizational-leadership dimension of Menemism*

Contrary to its political and socio-economic traits, the organizational-leadership dimension of Menemism remained loyal to the classical Peronist, ‘caudillo’ style of leadership, just like Kirchnerism later. That is, though failing to “reproduce the substance” of classical Peronism in other respects, Menemism preserved the rhetoric and rituals of the Peronist tradition in its leadership patterns (Armony, 2005; Schamis, 2006). Therefore, even when implementing the Washington Consensus reforms, the Menemist leadership employed a populist discourse resting on the familiar themes, such as “the people”, nationalism and economic redistribution (Grigera, 2017: 5).

However, what distinguished Menemism from classical Peronism in utilizing this discourse was its main purpose: to promote and justify the neoliberal market reforms. Menem tried to convince the Argentine people of the necessity of those reforms to both handle the new challenges of the global era and transform the bureaucratically corrupt and ineffective state structure (Sushant, 2012). After all, those reforms launched by Menem would primarily serve the “common good” in the first place.

To this end, like its classical Peronist antecedent, Menemism resorted to an exclusionary discourse that centered on a contradiction between “the people” and the “power bloc”. Now, though, the composition of the power bloc was slightly different: the political class and other established elites, the so-called privileged, better-off social strata, and the institutionalized forms of political representation (Weyland, 1996: 3). In line with this strategy of political deinstitutionalization, the Menemist leadership tried to form a direct relationship with its social support base by bypassing the established parties and interest organizations (Roberts, 1995; Ronchi, 2011; Weyland, 2003). For instance, President Menem frequently bypassed the Congress by issuing presidential decrees and intervened in the Supreme Court (Horowitz, 1999; Weyland, 1996).

At that point, what is crucial to note is that the affinities between Menemism and neoliberalism, particularly as to their shared anti-organizational bent (Weyland, 2003: 1098), played a crucial role here, as well. In other words, in an effort to protect the market from the effect of the special interests or rent-seeking groups, neoliberalism gave consent to an unmediated relationship between the neopopulist Menemist leadership and the masses (Armony, 2005: 12).

However, as the 1990s came to a close, the once solid link between Menemism and neoliberalism weakened (Weyland, 2003: 1113), with Menemism losing credibility both within the Peronist movement and across the country. The ten-year-reign of Menemism ended with the electoral defeat encountered in the 1999 elections, which saw the Radical candidate, Fernando de la Rúa elected as the new president.

#### 4. Kirchnerism: Return to classical Peronist roots?

Following the neopopulist era, radical populism emerged during the late-1990s as a reaction to the neoliberal practices of neopopulism, based on the defense of political independence, economic protectionism and nationalization (Arnson and de la Torre, 2013).

Kirchnerism, the contemporary radical populist brand of Peronism in Argentina, has similarly adhered to economic redistribution and larger political inclusion. Seeking to revive the populist traditions of Peronism (Roberts, 2007: 12)

via its left-leaning agenda, Kirchnerism developed its political and socio-economic strategies around an exact rejection of Menemism's neoliberal legacy.

Building on this platform, *Kirchnerismo* has dominated the political landscape in Argentina since 2003. This impact achieved an unprecedented point even exceeding the party divisions, in that certain groups from rival parties such as the UCR, PS (*Partido Socialista* - Socialist Party), and CPA (*Partido Comunista de la Argentina* - Communist Party of Argentina) identified themselves with Kirchnerism<sup>5</sup>. Under the presidencies of "both Kirchners", Kirchnerism further consolidated its hold in power in a bid to realize its policy agenda.

#### 4.1. Kirchnerism's rise to power

An analysis of the political, socio-economic and organizational-leadership attributes of Kirchnerism, related to classical Peronism and Menemism, would be incomplete without an account of its political ascendance. This is because the primary reasons underlying Kirchnerism's rise to power in the wake of the 2001-2002 crisis give crucial clues about how Kirchnerism has related to classical Peronism and Menemism in setting its overall agenda. As such, it is likely to identify three primary reasons for the political ascendance of Kirchnerism.

First, the apparent failure of Menemist neoliberal policies led to the rising popularity of Kirchnerism within the Peronist movement. Despite launched with very high expectations, Menem's neoliberal reforms were popularly believed to bring nothing but rising socio-economic inequalities and the 2001-2002 economic crisis. Indeed, the policies applied during Menem's presidency never fully resonated with the Peronist movement, which is conventionally characterized by state-centrism and economic protectionism on behalf of the labor and the poor (Scherlis, 2008: 592). Therefore, by the time the PJ had an electoral defeat against the Radicals in the 1999 elections, it was already time for change.

Consequently, Kirchnerism managed to establish itself as a plausible option to lead Peronism at this critical juncture, not least based on its anti-neoliberal agenda. As is well known, throughout the history of Peronism, it was likely to regroup under a newly 'shining' Peronist clique after the leadership of the previously dominant group fades following an internal splinter or a nation-wide failure (Fernandez, 2015). Therefore, akin to Menemism which once dominated the Peronist movement by undermining the classical Peronist principles of economic protectionism and state interventionism, Kirchnerism pursued the same path, albeit against Menemism this time.

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<sup>5</sup> The supporters of Kirchnerism within the UCR were called *radicales K*, while the Socialist supporters were known as *socialistas K*.

Relatedly, the chaotic environment arising from the 2001-2002 crisis marks the second reason behind the rise of Kirchnerism. Marking the biggest crisis in the recent Argentine history, this crisis led to a long period of domestic turmoil that saw a default on the country's foreign debt and the expropriation of bank savings in foreign currencies, alongside a deep crisis of governance marked by the succession of five presidents in a month (Grigera, 2017: 7).

In what follows, whilst struggling to tackle the negative implications of the crisis, Argentinians lost almost all their faith in the established institutions of the political system, not least the political parties. At the height of the internal chaos, the Argentine streets were full of protestors blaming all politicians and political parties for this economic catastrophe and calling them to quit with the slogan "Que se vayan todos!" ("All of them must go!") (Grigera, 2017; Scherlis, 2008). As such, the popular confidence in political parties among Argentine people declined to a historical low of 4 percent in 2002 from the level of 29 percent in 1997. Likewise, while the rate of the Argentines declaring support for the government was 20 percent in 1996, this declined to as low as 7 percent as of 2002 (see Table 1)<sup>6</sup>. As another sign of the crisis of representation, in the 2001 midterm elections, 22 percent of the electorate cast blank or spoiled votes to show their frustration (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008: 22). Apparently, people were looking for a reliable political alternative, other than neoliberalism, that would govern the country and restore public trust in the democratic system again.

In such a sober atmosphere, Kirchnerism offered some reasonable solutions towards a host of political, economic, and social problems that paralyzed the entire country. Through its left-wing Peronist discourse, Kirchnerism placed large emphasis both on the labor force and state intervention in the economy for the benefit of the domestic industry and employment (Aytaç and Öniş, 2014: 47), in the sense of classical Peronism. Acknowledging the political reality that "the essence of Peronism is the workers and to deny the workers is to deny Peronism", Kirchnerism thus frequently highlighted the salience of the traditional Peronist coalition of industrialists-workers (Calvo and Murillo, 2012: 152).

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<sup>6</sup> For the stated years, the rates of popular confidence in the political parties and government include the answers of "a lot of confidence" and "some confidence", as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Rates of Public Trust in Political Parties and Government

|                      | Political Parties |      |      |      | Government |      |      |      |
|----------------------|-------------------|------|------|------|------------|------|------|------|
|                      | 1997              | 2002 | 2007 | 2013 | 1996       | 2002 | 2007 | 2013 |
| A lot of confidence  | 4%                | 0%   | 1%   | 4%   | 5%         | 1%   | 7%   | 14%  |
| Some confidence      | 25%               | 4%   | 13%  | 21%  | 15%        | 6%   | 28%  | 30%  |
| Little confidence    | 32%               | 15%  | 39%  | 37%  | 32%        | 18%  | 39%  | 29%  |
| No confidence at all | 35%               | 80%  | 47%  | 37%  | 45%        | 74%  | 26%  | 26%  |

*Source:* All the data for the specified years have been retrieved from Latinobarometro (<http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>).

*Note:* The responses of "No answer/Refused" and "Don't know" have been excluded.

In an attempt to restore faith in political institutions, both Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner moved to break the popular conception that political parties and the government mainly heed the interests of the international creditors and global markets, not of the Argentinians (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008: 22). To this end, both presidents launched high-profile battles against the entities that were considered to restrain the government's room for manoeuvre, such as the IMF, foreign and domestic capitalists, bondholders and the military (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008: 22). Despite criticized for the personalist tendencies of both presidents, those attempts resulted in a remarkable rise in the general levels of popular trust in the political institutions. The overall confidence in Argentine political parties steadily grew, first to 14 percent in 2007, and then to 25 percent in 2013, coupled with the rising level of trust in government, first to 35 percent in 2007, and then to 44 percent in 2013 (see Table 1).

As the third and final factor behind Kirchnerism's success can be given the conjunctural rise of the Left across Latin America, epitomized as the 'Pink Tide' (Grigera, 2017; Iglesias, 2015; Roberts, 2007; Wylde, 2010). At the beginning of the 2000s, all the Latin American countries were experiencing a "leftist renaissance" (Oxhorn, 2003: 9). This region-wide tendency saw several leftist candidates consecutively take presidencies in many Latin American countries, including Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, and Brazil. As part of this leftist/progressive turn, Nestor Kirchner took office in Argentina in 2003.

#### 4.2. *What Kirchnerism stands for?*

In light of the main premises of classical Peronism and Menemism, Kirchnerism<sup>7</sup> developed a policy framework as a response to the political turbulence of the early-2000s. As to its political, socio-economic and organizational-leadership dimensions, Kirchnerism reclaimed classical Peronism by designating itself as a back-to-roots movement. In this respect, Menemism emerged as another primary point of reference, albeit in a negative sense, for Kirchnerism. This means that while attempting to revive the “justicialist” legacy of classical Peronism with a left-wing agenda, Kirchnerism tried to break away from the neoliberal legacy of Menemism. However, as proven by some striking similarities between these two, the Kirchnerist rejection of Menemism sometimes remained mostly rhetorical.

##### 4.2.1. *Political dimension of Kirchnerism*

The primary political motivation of Kirchnerism was to represent a political alternative to the predominant neoliberal model. As neoliberalism laid the ground for neopopulist Menemism, the idea of ‘post-neoliberalism’ gave essence to the radical populist understanding of Kirchnerism (Wylde, 2016: 322). Therefore, in an attempt to go beyond Menemism, Kirchnerism attempted to revitalize the long-forgotten roots of classical Peronism in the 2000s’ Argentina.

One part of this political strategy was to highlight the convergences with the political dimension of classical Peronism. Given that the wide-ranging political and economic exclusion of the masses and the institutional weaknesses that led to classical Peronism similarly sparked the rise of Kirchnerism in the post-neoliberal era (de la Torre, 2007; Roberts, 2007), Kirchnerism moved to revive the political traditions of classical Peronism. For instance, Kirchnerism often referred to three main pillars of classical Peronism, including political independence, economic sovereignty and social justice. Moreover, on the symbolic level, Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner were popularly conceived to resemble the duo of Juan Peron-Eva Peron, in terms of their similar political capacities to generate change. In particular, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner relied on the legacy of Eva Peron for further incorporation of women into politics.

In the same vein, Kirchnerism increasingly engaged with the defense of human rights issues on the political arena. Addressing the human rights violations committed during the military dictatorship of the ‘National Reorganization Period’,

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<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that despite generally following the same policy line, there exist some differences between the presidencies of Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (2007-2015), not least as to the conflictual relations with labor and business interests since 2007.

popularly called the “Dirty War”<sup>8</sup>, Nestor and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner openly challenged the impunities provided by the previous Alfonsín and Menem governments to the military figures. As a result, a number of military officers were tried before courts and punished for the crimes against humanity.

Another part of this political strategy was the denouncement of Menemism. As the first step, Nestor Kirchner built his own position and authority within the Peronist movement by attacking Menem’s legacy (Calvo and Murillo, 2012: 160). In later phases, Kirchnerism as a movement broadly positioned itself against Menemism, with the primary goal of realizing the change from the neoliberal model to a more state-centric, ‘neo-developmental’ model (Wylde, 2014; 2016). Following the collapse of the neoliberal experiment of Menemism, what Kirchnerism aimed was to pull the Peronist movement back to its nationalist and statist roots (Roberts, 2007: 12).

However, for some views, Kirchnerism did not offer a new political model, but just a reformulation of the Peronist populism (Iglesias, 2015: 65). Accordingly, even the neo-developmental regime Kirchnerism sought to establish simultaneously arose from and within the neoliberal logic (Wylde, 2016: 324). To put it another way, because of its key elements of continuity with classical Peronism, Kirchnerism is undoubtedly Peronist; but its unique blend of “national relationships and policies with a distinct international strategy based around reducing debt, a reformulation of the relationship with the IMF, and political preference for the national industry” exclusively renders Kirchnerism a “21st-century Peronism for a globalizing world”, as Wylde (2010; 2011; 2014) notes.

#### 4.2.2. *Socio-economic dimension of Kirchnerism*

The socio-economic dimension accounts for the *raison d’être* of Kirchnerism because most of its pledges were concentrated in this area. Motivated by the central goal of offering working solutions to a range of socio-economic problems in the post-crisis Argentina, Kirchnerism adopted a neo-developmental model, which was committed to economic recovery, alongside reducing poverty and inequality (Wylde, 2016: 323).

At the time Nestor Kirchner was elected president in 2003, the Argentine economy was in a desperate situation, as explained above. In addition to the high levels of unemployment and low levels of economic growth, Argentina was under the pressure of many international debtors. At the societal level, people were

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<sup>8</sup> The Dirty War refers to the era of military dictatorship in 1976-83, when a broad range of political dissidents including students, trade unionists, journalists, political activists and left-wing Peronists were persecuted through different means by the military junta. According to the official figures, over 30,000 people “disappeared” during this period.

dealing with the political and social exclusions caused by the neoliberal policies (de la Torre, 2007: 394). Against such a backdrop did Kirchnerism emerge as a plausible alternative with its centre-left, neo-developmental agenda, which rested on group solidarity, collective action and an interventionist state (Roberts, 2007: 11).

As part of the Kirchnerist attempts to revive the classical Peronist roots, the historic Peronist coalition of industrialists-workers, which was impaired during the Menem years, was placed huge emphasis. To manage relations with labor and business, an approach of “segmented neo-corporatism” was adopted (Wylde, 2010; 2014; 2016), alongside offering broad benefits to these two groups (Richardson, 2009: 229). Moreover, in stark contrast with Menemism, Nestor Kirchner gave special emphasis to increased cooperation with the organized labor, based on the logic of nationalist/statist development (Wylde, 2010: 14). Nevertheless, as the economy deteriorated with the Great Recession (2008-9), those organic links with organized labor and domestic business were strained during the term of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

However, there was more to the socio-economic support base of Kirchnerism. Beyond these two elements of the historic Peronist coalition, Kirchnerism also relied on the support of the informal sector workers and the unemployed (the *piqueteros*), the poor, trade unions, agro-industrialists and even some big companies (Richardson, 2009; Wylde, 2012; 2014; 2016). Besides, Kirchnerism appealed to certain middle-class elements under both presidents (Calvo and Murillo, 2012: 151), not least due to the consumer boom produced by the macroeconomic stabilization (Wylde, 2010: 5). Given that those middle-class groups were also a part of the Menemist support base during the 1990s, this points to a common characteristic between Kirchnerism and Menemism, albeit a difference with classical Peronism.

Stemming from its anti-neoliberal stance, Kirchnerism came up with a socio-economic policy agenda that mainly revolved around fair redistribution of income and nationalization. In the wake of the 2001-2002 crisis, Nestor Kirchner defaulted on the national debt, which freed an important share of the national budget from interest repayments (Grigera, 2017: 8), openly defied the IMF and international creditors, and restored some price controls and state ownership of public utilities (Roberts, 2007: 12). Moreover, both Nestor and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner aimed to end the Menemist wage-depressing policies by pushing for a series of minimum-wage increases, encouraging unions’ collective bargaining power and eliminating the formal restrictions on the collective labor strikes. Meanwhile, huge expenditure in public works and a range of public subsidies fostered the economic activity, alongside a favorable exchange rate that boosted export-led industrial manufacturing (Calvo&Murillo, 2012: 151-2). In the end, Kirchnerism was

conceived as a pro-labor strategy for economic growth based on selective protectionism and state interventionism in the sense of classical Peronism, which provided notable post-crisis growth through a mix of domestic policy and eligible international circumstances (Aytaç and Öniş, 2014; Wylde, 2014).

Though the anti-neoliberal Kirchnerist policy agenda seems to be substantially different from Menemism, they have some marked similarities in this realm, too. For instance, despite challenging many entrepreneurs with an anti-privatization manner, Nestor Kirchner simultaneously stressed the need for “serious capitalism” (*capitalismo en serio*). This entailed the relative acceptance of some neoliberal principles, such as sound fiscal policy, budget surplus, steady inflation and foreign investment<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, whilst applying the redistributive policies, President Nestor Kirchner concurrently aimed to achieve sustained economic growth, along with avoiding hyperinflationary and balance-of-payments crises (Richardson, 2009: 229). In addition, the well-known emphasis on the export-oriented growth scheme appeared as another commonality between Kirchnerism and Menemism.

The social support scheme of Kirchnerism represents another area of similarity with Menemism. In an effort to complement the economic policies, the Kirchnerist government applied a wide range of social policies<sup>10</sup>. However, in contrast to classical Peronism, which provided social protection through clientelism for the urban working class, Kirchnerism much more maintained the Menemist tradition of the safety-net model of social welfare, which could target the worst manifestations of poverty instead of applying a more systematic approach (Wylde, 2014: 14). In other words, representing a rather financialized approach to social welfare, the safety-net model of neoliberalism, which rested on Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) (Grigera, 2017: 9) to the poor, kept on functioning as the primary means of social support during the era of Kirchnerism (Wylde, 2014, 197).

At that point, some qualifications need to be made about the differing approach assumed during the presidency of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. When elected president in 2007, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner pledged to deepen the redistributionist policies applied by her predecessor (Calvo and Murillo, 2012: 157). However, in contrast to Nestor Kirchner’s presidency, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner faced more challenging conditions in the national and international

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<sup>9</sup> This generally gradual and cautious approach of Nestor Kirchner is even labelled as the “Washington Consensus without Convertibility” by many commentators (Wylde, 2010: 4).

<sup>10</sup> Those social policies cover a social security reform that extended access to the unemployed and informal sector workers, the Universal Child Subsidy, a conditional cash transfer program that covered 30 percent of those under 18, larger inclusion of older Argentines in the pension system, heavy investment in public works, greater funding for public education and scientific search, and creation and/or increase of pension benefits and family allowances (Calvo and Murillo, 2012).

contexts, which in turn directly impacted on her approach to the socio-economic matters. As the worsening global economic conditions in the wake of the Great Recession led to a remarkable decrease in international demand, alongside a fall in the international commodity prices, the Argentine export-driven growth model was severely affected (Wylde, 2016: 337). Added to the turbulent international economy were other serious issues, such as ongoing negotiations with international creditors, increasing inflation and declining fiscal surplus (Wylde, 2010: 19).

However, the most serious incident that happened during Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's presidency was the 2008 farmers' rebellion. On 10 March 2008, President Kirchner used her executive powers to enact a price-adjusted export tariff (*retenciones*) for key soybean products, such as soy, maize, wheat and sunflower, which would mean increasing tax rates as the international commodity prices rise. This decision caused a nearly four-month nation-wide conflict between the agricultural manufacturers and the Kirchner government, which saw the main roads to ports and cities blocked by the farmers (Calvo and Murillo, 2012; Richardson, 2009; Wylde, 2016). Consequently, President Kirchner had to renounce this new system of taxation for export products. Following this incident, President Kirchner went on to be elected again in the 2011 presidential elections. Nevertheless, this event is still recalled as the one marking the abandonment by Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner of Nestor Kirchner's rather cautious and pragmatic approach to socio-economic matters (Wylde, 2016: 337).

Taken together, as to the socio-economic dimension, Kirchnerism precisely represents an overall attempt to return to the classical Peronist roots. However, on many accounts, Kirchnerism unexpectedly had some similarities with Menemism despite its rhetorical opposition, as explained above. In other words, Kirchnerism fits into classical Peronism, in that it placed huge emphasis on state interventionism and social justice. However, due to functioning in the established forms of the neoliberal state and being constrained by the international forces of neoliberal globalization, Kirchnerism had marked similarities with Menemism contrary to general expectations (Wylde, 2016: 338-9).

#### 4.2.3. *Organizational-leadership dimension of Kirchnerism*

Contrary to the previous two dimensions, the organizational-leadership dimension of Kirchnerism generally followed in the footsteps of both classical Peronism and Menemism. Like Peron and Menem, Nestor Kirchner generally favored a personalized and centralized leadership style. This translated into President Nestor Kirchner taking many day-to-day decisions himself and ruling often through presidential decrees (Wylde, 2014: 213), rather than through the channel of the Congress or other institutions of horizontal accountability (Levitsky and Murillo, 2008: 19).

Likewise, in order to consolidate his personal control over Peronism's vast but fractious party machine, Nestor Kirchner increasingly outmanoeuvred potential rivals within Peronism (Roberts, 2007: 12). In line with the 'transversality' strategy, Nestor Kirchner even went beyond political party differences by drawing support from the Radicals, the Socialists and the Communists via his electoral bloc, the FPV (*Frente para la Victoria* – Front for Victory).

Though dropping the transversality strategy at the start of her second presidential term, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner maintained the personalistic and centralized leadership style of her predecessor to a greater extent. As the Argentine economy deteriorated, those tendencies of President Kirchner caused rising tension in the relations with the labor and business sectors, however.

Despite those minor differences between two phases of Kirchnerism, thus it is possible to argue that both presidents consistently employed a populist discourse during their terms. In this respect, contrasting 'the people' with 'the elites', both presidents attacked several entities, including the IMF, international creditors, multinational oil corporations and the military (Iglesias, 2015; Levitsky and Murillo, 2008; Richardson, 2009). To be sure, as part of the internal power struggle within Peronism, Menemism was also targeted by Kirchnerism *per se* (Aytaç and Öniş, 2014: 44).

## 5. Conclusion

Looking from a historical perspective, Peronism has always occupied a special place among other cases of populism in South America. Developing under the impact of the peculiar conditions of Argentina, Peronism has proven successful in adapting itself to changing circumstances. As a reflection of this, classical Peronism, Menemism and Kirchnerism succeeded each other as the classical populist, neopopulist and radical populist variants of Peronism, respectively.

Designating political sovereignty, economic independence and social justice as its primary pillars, classical Peronism placed huge emphasis on the political incorporation of the excluded social masses, such as the organized labor, the poor and the dispossessed. On the socio-economic level, classical Peronism rested on the historic alliance between industrialists and workers. Relatedly, the strategy of national developmentalism led the classical Peronist administration to apply several social programs that radically transformed the social fabric. Applying the formula of top-down political mobilization by a charismatic leader, classical Peronism polarized its societal support base against "the elite".

As the neopopulist form of Peronism, Menemism marks a rather neoliberal turn in the Peronist tradition, which was fed by the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and populism. Politically, the political deinstitutionalization of the

Menem governments accelerated the imposition of the neoliberal market adjustment reforms from above. In line with neoliberalism, Menemism appealed to the politically demobilized and unorganized labor in the informal sector, even at the expense of damaging the traditional Peronist alliance of industrialists-workers. Moreover, the neoliberal economic project of Menemism mainly relied on market liberalization, trade liberalization and privatization. Concerning the organizational-leadership dimension, Menemism did not radically diverge from the traditional Peronist line of personalist leadership but mainly sought to promote and justify the neoliberal market reforms whilst pitting “the people” against the “power bloc”.

In light of these points, Kirchnerism surfaced as a reaction to the neoliberal practices of Menemism in the early-1990s, so represented the radical populist variant of Peronism in the Argentine context. As revealed by its main premises, Kirchnerism attempted to reclaim classical Peronism by designating itself as a back-to-basics movement, following the collapse of Menemism as a neoliberal experiment within the Peronist tradition. To this end, Kirchnerism frequently highlighted the justicialist legacy of classical Peronism as its main historical reservoir, whilst simultaneously denouncing the neoliberal legacy of Menemism. However, due to a variety of reasons, the Kirchnerist opposition against Menemism at times remained rhetorical at best, as revealed by crucial similarities between these two in practice.

The primary goal of constituting a political alternative to the predominant neoliberal model led Kirchnerism to predicate its political agenda on three pillars of traditional Peronism, including political independence, economic sovereignty and social justice. In a complementary manner, the Kirchnerist governments aimed to pull the Peronist movement back to its nationalist and statist roots after the era of Menemism. Nonetheless, despite its harsh opposition to Menemism, Kirchnerism could not totally be isolated from the political impact of the neoliberal order. This is because even the political model it offered emerged within and was primarily influenced by neoliberalism.

In an effort to solve a broad range of socio-economic problems in the post-crisis Argentina, the Kirchnerist neo-developmental model committed itself to economic recovery, alongside reducing poverty and inequality. In line with this strategy, the historic Peronist coalition of industrialists-workers was given huge emphasis, along with ensuring the support of the informal sector workers, the unemployed and the poor through various social support schemes. Nevertheless, as one of the common aspects with Menemism, Kirchnerism also appealed to the middle-class groups, not least as a result of the consumer boom provided by the macroeconomic stabilization program.

In the context of its anti-neoliberal economic policy agenda, Kirchnerism practiced a pro-labor strategy for economic growth based on selective

protectionism, state interventionism and nationalization, alongside huge expenditure in public works and a range of public subsidies. This strategy, combined with eligible international circumstances, yielded remarkable post-crisis growth in Argentina until the Great Recession. However, President Nestor Kirchner's obvious emphasis on macroeconomic stability, along with avoiding hyperinflationary and balance-of-payments crises, points to another similarity with Menemism. Added to this was the shared belief in the salience of the export-oriented growth model for the Argentine economy. Moreover, contrary to the clientelist social support network of classical Peronism, Kirchnerism maintained the Menemist tradition of the safety-net model of social welfare, which targeted the worst manifestations of poverty through conditional cash transfers. Put simply, its huge emphasis on state interventionism and social justice drew Kirchnerism closer to classical Peronism; but its functioning within the constraints of the national and global forms of neoliberalism produced undeniable similarities with the Menemist model in practice.

Regarding the organizational-leadership dimension, Kirchnerism preserved the personalized and centralized leadership style that also prevailed during classical Peronism and Menemism. However, in terms of contrasting "the people" with "the elites", Nestor and Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner targeted a wide range of entities, including the IMF, international creditors, multinational oil corporations and the military.

In sum, despite facing many challenges and obstacles along the road, Peronism has always managed to return, as proven once again by the election of Alberto Fernandez as the new president. For the past two decades, it has been Kirchnerism that dominated the political landscape in Argentina. Given the durability and ideological flexibility of Peronism, though, it would not be a surprise to see another Peronist strand emerge and dominate the domestic politics in the future.

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## Özet

### Yeniden köklere dönüş mü? Geleneksel Peronizm'i geri kazanma girişimi olarak Kirchnerizm

Bu makale, Kirchnerizm'in nasıl ortaya çıktığını ve ardından 2000'lerin başından bu yana Peronizm'in en güçlü kolu olarak Arjantin siyasetine nasıl hakim olduğunu incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Peronizm ve Menemizm'in siyasi, sosyo-ekonomik ve örgütsel liderlik niteliklerinin tahliline dayanan bu çalışmanın ana argümanı, merkez sol gündemiyle Kirchnerizm'in, 1990'larda Peronizm'in neoliberal bir yorumu olarak ortaya çıkan Menemizm'in aksine, siyasal egemenlik, ekonomik bağımsızlık ve sosyal adalet gibi temel unsurlarına vurgu yaparak geleneksel Peronizm'i canlandırmayı amaçladığıdır. Bununla birlikte, Kirchnerizm'in Menemizm karşıtlığı, uygulamada her ikisi arasında ortaya çıkan önemli benzerliklerin de ortaya koyduğu gibi zaman zaman retorik düzeyde kalmıştır.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* Arjantin siyaseti, Kirchnerizm, Menemizm, Peronizm, Latin Amerika'da popülizm.